

# China's Security: Implications for Israel

Shai Feldman

China's national objectives and its efforts to realize them may cause crises in the region of Northeast Asia. Moreover, these crises might escalate into violence — even if only of limited dimensions — as almost occurred between China and Taiwan during March 1996. Since the end of the 1970s, Israel has developed close ties with China, and in recent years these ties have become particularly strong in the area of defense. Yet, Israel's security is primarily dependent on its relations with the United States — a country perceived by the Chinese as being the main obstacle to achieving their national objectives. Israel thus risks finding itself between a rock and a hard place in this arena which is so rife with tension.

In recent years, Israel also has succeeded in improving its relations with both Japan and South Korea. Of course, the cooperation between Japan and the US has long played a major role in China's threat perception. In addition, the intensification of tensions in Northeast Asia in the wake of Taiwan's growing interest in acquiring military technology can present

This article was written following a visit to China by a delegation from the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies. In the framework of this visit, comprehensive discussions were held with senior Chinese officials on various topics connected to the security of Northeast Asia.

temptations to Israeli military industries. Israel must be extremely careful of direct or indirect involvement in that region, since such involvement might harm both its traditional relations with the US and its expanding ties with China and Japan.

This article refers to the U.S. role in these developments, but does not analyze, in depth, the internal and external factors, which will influence the formulation of US policy in the region. The purpose of this article is to describe the forces at play in Northeast Asia — particularly in the context of China-Taiwan relations — and to caution against any possible entanglement in the region on Israel's part.

## China's Goals and Power

China's foremost goal is to exercise its sovereignty over all territories it owns regards as its own.

Having succeeded in doing so with respect to Hong Kong and Macao, China is now directing its efforts at the "peaceful reunification" of Taiwan with the mainland. Senior Chinese officials claim that China's stand on this issue is moderate. According to them, China's intent in achieving this unification is primarily symbolic-diplomatic; i.e., it is up to Taiwan to abandon all trappings and assertions of independence and take upon itself the status of a Chinese canton,

including the adoption of the flag and national anthem of China. They stress that Taiwan will be able to continue operating per the current system which prevails on the island, under the slogan: "Two systems — one country." In addition to this principle, which already has been implemented in Hong Kong, they promise that Taiwan will be able to continue maintaining its own military forces for defense purposes; not as a symbol of independence.

At the same time, China is continuing to develop the ability to achieve its national objectives. Under the leadership of Deng Xiao Ping, the Communist regime has opened the gates of the country to foreign investors and trade with the outside world. The regime even instituted internal liberalization and significant privatization, the result being that the degree to which China operates per free-market rules is constantly increasing. This has resulted in intensified economic growth which is being felt throughout the capital of Beijing and some of the country's provinces.

The process of economic growth which China has been enjoying in recent years has extensively increased the breadth of resources which the country channels to military expansion. At the same time that it has been reducing the number of soldiers

serving in the Chinese army, the country has been investing massive efforts in improving its quality. This has been accomplished through the introduction of advanced technologies acquired from the West — including Israel — on platforms acquired through a combination of indigenous production and acquisitions from other countries, particularly Russia.

### Goals and Perceptions of Threat

In the eyes of China, the United States is perceived as the greatest stumbling block in its path to achieving its national goals. Washington is seen as being determined to make every effort to perpetuate and fortify its status as the only post-Cold War superpower. China claims that the US continues to expand its military power at the same time that - with the dissolution of the Soviet Union - any potential threats to its security have disappeared. Moreover, in its efforts to buttress its status, the US is also seen to be seeking the weakening of China and as acting, to prevent China from exercising its sovereignty. The ongoing US support of Taiwan is perceived by the Chinese as an important pillar of these efforts and as a violation of Washington's explicit promises and commitments to Beijing.

Lately, the Chinese government assessment has been that the US is

intensifying its military presence and involvement in the countries of the region. In its opinion, the US is enlarging the range and depth of defense cooperation with Japan and South Korea and improving its relations with the Philippines and Singapore. The Chinese especially emphasize the growing cooperation between the US and Japan in the area of anti-ballistic defense. According to the Chinese, North Korea merely serves as a pretext for the US to increase its military strength and expand its military presence in the region — a presence the true purpose of which is to dampen China's rising strength.

The US objectives vis-a-vis China and its growing involvement in Northeast Asia are perceived by China as reflecting the general trends in the US pattern of actions in recent years. If, after the end of the Cold War, there was hope that the US would play a positive role in the framework of the new world order and even advance bilateral and global arms control efforts, the Chinese now believe that the US is taking unilateral actions which are undermining those efforts. These actions commenced with the expansion of NATO on three planes: the number of members, the treaty's mandate, and the geographical sphere of activity.

This trend also found expression, in China's view, in the US intention to

develop a National Missile Defense (NMD) against ballistic missiles — even at the expense of eroding the treaty banning the deployment of anti-ballistic systems (the ABM Treaty). China viewed this as US readiness to disrupt the nuclear balance, upon which global strategic stability is based. Thus, according to China's contention, the US supports initiatives and arms-control pacts only when they serve its own narrow national interests. Washington's willingness to withdraw from the ABM Treaty and the US Senate's refusal to endorse the CTBT Treaty are, in China's opinion, conclusive proof of this trend.

### China-Taiwan: Escalation Scenarios

As noted, Taiwan is focal to achieving China's foremost current objective: exercising its sovereignty over all territories and districts which it believes belong to it. China's stand in this regard is not, however, entirely clear. On the one hand, senior officials constantly reiterate that China does not intend to use force, but is, rather, committed to achieving "peaceful reunification." On the other, there are those who stress that there is a limit to China's patience in this regard and that it will not wait forever for Taiwan to decide and return of its own volition.

Chinese leaders have as yet to define a precise timetable for achieving

reunification with Taiwan. It would appear, however, that, even if Taiwan itself does not undertake action in the opposite direction — to reinforce its independence and prevent returning to the control of China — there is no small amount of likelihood that crises will arise which might lead to escalation, if China fails in its efforts at “peaceful reunification.”

The likelihood that China will use force — even if only in a limited fashion — against Taiwan will increase if new developments in any way reduce China’s ability to apply its sovereignty over Taiwan in the future. China’s defense concept takes into account several scenarios, which might impel it to use military force:

**A. The decision by Taiwanese leadership to declare independence:** This would be a clear *casus belli*, and it would appear that China would not hesitate risking all of its economic achievements, taking any step necessary — including such that would cause military conflict with the US — in order to foil such independence.

**B. Interference by foreign elements into Chinese internal affairs:** Since China regards the issue of Taiwan as an internal one, it would appear that the expression “interference by foreign elements” applies to the possibility that foreign governments — particularly the US — might raise their levels of assistance to Taiwan.

**C. Internal upheavals in Taiwan:** This refers to internal changes which might

take place on the island which would cause the strengthening of those elements which support declaring Taiwanese independence. In such an event, China might take preemptive military action in advance of such a declaration.

**D. Development of a nuclear capability by Taiwan:** China would take preemptive action — including military action — if it finds evidence that Taiwan is developing a nuclear capability. This is based on the assessment that a nuclear capability in Taiwanese hands means that any future effort by China to extend its sovereignty over the island will involve an intolerable price.

### The TMD Issue

In addition to the potential developments mentioned above as possibly causing hostilities, senior Chinese officials stress an additional issue which they view with great concern: The possibility that Taiwan will acquire an anti-ballistic-missile systems (TMD — Theater Missile Defense). According to their argument, deployment of such a system on the island will upset the strategic balance which has served as the foundation of regional stability.

The Chinese contend that the military significance of a TMD system would be limited, since they, in turn, would be able to acquire additional ballistic missiles and launchers, thereby saturating the defense system which might be deployed on Taiwan.

It would appear, however, that they are more concerned over other ramifications connected with the deployment of a TMD system on the island: One is financial, as this would compel China to devote additional resources to enhancing its strategic forces. The second is political, in that this might give Taiwan a sense of confidence which would lead it to believe it capable of withstanding the risks involved in declaring independence.

There is a broader context to the Chinese position regarding the deployment of a TMD system on Taiwan. China’s deterrence strategy has always been based on a limited number of delivery systems and nuclear warheads thus avoiding the insane arms race which saw the US and the USSR arming themselves with tens of thousands of nuclear weapons. The reliability of this “minimal-deterrence” strategy was based on the assumption that the other powers would not equip themselves with anti-ballistic-missile defense systems. China thus relied on the concept that its limited number of nuclear weapons would be sufficient to assure its ability to deter direct threats to its security and survival.

It is no wonder, then, that China now views the possibility that the US might install an NMD system and that Japan and Taiwan might equip themselves with TMD systems as threatening its defense strategy. Its leaders are convinced that deployment of such systems will obligate China to

allocate considerable resources to the research and development of new weapons. They argue that if this superfluous arms race is imposed on China, there will be no reason for it to continue cooperating with the various global arms-control regimes. This would particularly apply to supplier regimes that are not formalized in global treaties – such as the MTCR (Missile Technology Control Regime).

### The Likelihood of War

Inherent to the trends evident in the US and Northeast Asia is a non-trivial likelihood for crises which may result in military conflicts, limited as they may be. Considering inclinations current prevailing in Washington — especially among Republican members of the Senate — it is not impossible that Taiwan might, in coming years, feel it enjoys sufficient American support to initiate one of the scenarios which could cause a military reaction by China. As noted, even in the absence of such a step, China might lose patience over Taiwan's refusal to carry out "peaceful reunification," particularly as the Chinese believe they have set forth "an offer you can't refuse" regarding Taiwan's right to maintain its own army.

A violent confrontation in Northeast Asia may also result from miscalculation or misperceptions. This is particularly valid in view of the ambiguity surrounding Chinese policy. First, it is not at all clear what Beijing's timetable is — how long it is

willing to wait patiently for the achievement of "peaceful reunification." Second, there is inherent ambiguity surrounding some of the *casi belli* for China vis-a-vis Taiwan. For example, it is not at all clear what degree of "interference by foreign elements in Chinese internal affairs" would trigger a military response; particularly since, in China's view, Japan and the US have been involved in the Taiwan issue from the very start. Third, it is not at all clear what types of "internal upheavals" in Taiwan might cause China to react. Thus, there is the risk of a military



conflict developing even if none of the sides intends it.

It is difficult to believe China will lose patience vis-a-vis Taiwan and will respond to any variety of developments in such an extreme manner as to endanger its tremendous economic accomplishments of recent years. At the same time, it would be irresponsible to ignore the warnings of senior Chinese officials that they regard Taiwan as an integral part of their country and that they are not prepared to tolerate any actions, which will impede the efforts to exercise China's sovereignty over the island.

### Implications for Israel

In examining the security and stability of Northeast Asia, the following points must be taken into account.

- A. The existing trends in Northeast Asia contain a potential for crises which carry the additional risk of escalating into a broad military conflict in the region. China may lose its patience, or Taiwan may — with or without US encouragement — take steps, which will be viewed by the Chinese as being intended to fortify the island. Under such circumstances, China might take military action even at the risk of damaging its economic enterprise.
- B. If China takes military action against Taiwan, it will be difficult for the US to avoid becoming directly involved in the conflict.
- C. Israel's relations with the United States are more important than any other set of relations Israel has — certainly in comparison with Israel-China relations. Israel-US relations find expression on varied and numerous spheres, and they are anchored in shared values, a common commitment to democratic government and a wide array of American strategic interests. Israel reaps tremendous benefits from these relations — politically, militarily, and economically — and there is no chance that Israel will, in the foreseeable future, develop a system of relations with any other country which would be similar in



scope or depth or be comparable to the special relations which currently exist between it and the only superpower — the United States.

D. Israel's military industry is currently fighting for its life. Since the mid-1980s, it has experienced a significant down-sizing, resulting

from both the continuing reductions of Israel's defense budget and the decline in the international arms market, as a result of various developments (including the democratization processes in South and Central America, the political changes in

South Africa, and the economic crisis in Asia). As a result of these changes, there is a strong incentive to sell arms to the countries of Northeast Asia.

These assessments lead to the following conclusions with regard to Israel's relations with the countries of Northeast Asia:

**A** Israel must exercise caution in all matters related to selling arms to China and transferring military technology to it. The tensions which arise from time to time in US-Israel relations in the context of these issues are relatively limited in comparison to what might happen if a military conflict broke out in Northeast Asia, and American soldiers met their deaths while China was making use of Israeli technology. Such a possibility might cause a serious rupture in Israel-US relations.

**B** Israel must totally avoid transferring military technology to Taiwan, in spite of the temptation to find new external markets. It also must resist the natural desire to reduce the costs involved in deploying anti-ballistic-missile defenses in Israel by finding additional customers to purchase components of such systems, thus reducing development costs. Israeli assistance to Taiwan in this area would cause a serious crisis in Israel-China relations.

**C** In view of Israel's influence in Washington and its growing ties with China, and considering China's growing importance as a world power — Israel should examine the possibility of contributing to the reduction of misunderstandings between Washington and Beijing. It can do so by making use of non-official channels, while demanding that China make a significant concessions in return: Stopping the transfer of ballistic-missile and non-conventional-weapons technology to countries in the Middle East, particularly Syria and Iran.